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THE

BASKET MAKERS.

IN TWO PARTS.

BY MRS. HEWLETT.

PART I.

SALEM:

PUBLISHED BY WHIPPLE AND LAWRENCE.

1824.

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ONE fine summer's afternoon, a Sunday-school teacher was returning from a neighbouring village, where he had been instructing his class. He was one who enjoyed aright the scenes of nature, because he had learnt to view them in the light of God's holy word. The various objects he met with were made occasions of recalling to his mind passages of Scripture by which they were improved. Thus a serious and devotional spirit was cultivated, and the mind brought into a pleasing state of preparation for the services of the sanctuary, which he usually attended in the evening, having sacrificed his own privileges in the afternoon, in order to promote the best interests of poor children.

In his way, he passed through a piece of land, which presented a most dreary and barren appearance. The soil was harsh and stony, and had never been deemed worth the expense of cultivation. Here and there a sickly shrub put forth a few scanty, half-withered leaves. Even

the hardy furze had scarcely thriven enough to enliven the scene with its yellow blossoms. The grass was scanty, short, and brown, and ill supplied the poor, patient, solitary ass, turned there to seek his scanty subsistence. Brambles and thistles alone seemed to flourish ; and the passenger was reminded of the early curse under which the earth was brought because of the sin of man. Gen. iii. 17, 18.

A few paces farther, a short but steep descent opened upon a rich valley, watered by a deep majestic stream. On its banks grew the bending willow and the aspiring poplar ; the dark glossy leaves and graceful flowers of periwinkle adorned its brink ; and the blossoms of meadow-sweet perfumed the air ; while the lively and beautiful green of the herbage, at once relieved the eye of the passenger, and afforded abundant pasture to the numerous cattle grazing or reposing around.

The plenty, beauty, and cheerfulness of the scene presented a striking contrast to that which had preceded it, and led the mind of the teacher to a comparison between the situation of those of his fellow-creatures whose dwelling is in the region and shadow of death, on whom the Sun of Righteousness has not arisen, nor the river of the water of life flowed near their dwellings —and theirs, whose highly favoured lot is cast where the day-spring from on high appears to

guide their feet in the way of peace, and whose vallies are watered by the river, the streams whereof make glad the city of the living God. Psalm xlvi. 4. He thought with benevolent pleasure of the change within a few years effected and effecting by means of Bible Societies, Sunday-schools, and Missionary exertions. He felt grateful, that in labours so honorable and beneficial, he was permitted to take a share; and his mind glowed at the prospect which the sacred Scriptures reveal of the wide spread and the universal diffusion of divine truth. "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." Isa. xi. 9. "Men shall be blessed in him, [the Saviour of the world,] and all nations shall call him blessed." Ps. lxxii. 17. "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. In the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert." Isa. xxxv. 1, 6. "Instead of the thorn, shall come up the fir-tree, and instead of the briar, shall come up the myrtle-tree." Isa. lv. 13.

Meditating on these encouraging predictions, and applying them as motives to be "stedfast, unmoveable, abounding in the work of the Lord, as knowing that his labour should not be in vain in the Lord," (1 Cor. xv. 58) the teacher pursued his path by the river side. A little be-

fore him, the stream separated and surrounded a few yards of land, overgrown with flags and rushes, on which were three or four osiers, whose branches having been cut and peeled, were placed around the stems of the trees to dry. From a distance, the teacher perceived that two boys were on the island : they appeared to be striving and quarreling ; and as he drew nearer the spot, he heard them break forth in language so dreadfully profane and violent, as made him shudder. "Alas!" thought he, "that this lovely scene of nature should be thus disfigured by the moral thorns and thistles of sin! Alas! that these children surrounded by so much beauty and beneficence, should profane the name of HIM who scattered it all around, and call the terrors of his wrath upon his nobler work—their immortal souls!" He approached to remonstrate with the lads ; but before he could speak, in the violence of their striving, they had insensibly pushed each other so near the edge of the island, that one of them slipped in. It was the elder of the two. The other leaned over the brink, and held out his hand, but it could not reach his brother ; and as neither of them could swim, the unhappy boy must have perished, had not the steps of the teacher been providentially directed to the spot. An old barge laid near, which reached almost from the edge of the river to that of the island,

by which the boys had managed to get across : not a moment was lost ; the teacher sprang into the boat, threw off his clothes, and plunging into the stream, rescued the boy from a watery grave.

The few tattered clothes of the children, bespoke their condition to be that of extreme poverty ; and the teacher feared that the "home" to which he was anxious as quickly as possible to convey the lad, would afford but few of the accommodations which his circumstances required. On their way thither, he gathered from the boys that their father was a soldier, and had been long abroad ; that they, with their mother, gained a living, (or rather sought it, for they looked almost famished) by making baskets and mats, which they travelled from place to place to sell ; and that they had now been sent out to collect materials for their work. To the questions,—"Why do you thus spend the Sabbath day ?—Is it right that you should thus pursue your daily calling, were you even pursuing that calling honestly ? Were the rushes and the twigs you had been collecting, your own, or had you permission from the owners to take them ?—Can you read ?—Do you ever attend any place of public worship ?"—The answers or evasions returned were such as too strongly confirmed what their profane words and wicked actions had already declared—that

this family was “living without God in the world !”

The heart of the kind teacher was moved in tender pity at the neglected wretched state of these unhappy children, and he longed to be the instrument of rescuing them from vice and ruin, as he had already been of preserving from death and danger. On reaching the miserable hovel where they lived, the mother was found working up her few remaining flags, and expecting her boys to return with a fresh supply. Seeing the younger enter empty-handed, she began reproving him for staying so long, and returning at last without a supply ; but in an instant, her attention was turned to her other son, whom the stranger led in, dripping, shivering and pale. A bundle of straw in the corner of the room, covered with a few mere rags, was pointed to as the bed on which the poor boy must be placed. “Ah,” thought the teacher, “is it thus that many of my poor fellow-creatures are lodged and covered ? Let it lead me to greater thankfulness for the mercies of my own lot, and to greater exertions, that their poverty may be cheered by a knowledge of the comforts of religion.”

This good young man was not rich : yet he did much good in the neighbourhood where he resided : first, by denying himself many little enjoyments which might have been agreeable,

but by sparing which he could do something for the relief of the distressed ; and next, by representing their cases to those who had it in their power to do more. Having laid the poor boy on his mean bed, he hastened to a kind-hearted lady who lived hard by, and stated the case. She immediately sent her servant with some needful supplies. Notwithstanding all the kind attention that was paid to the poor boy, he became very ill, and the lady desired her apothecary to call and see him. It was his opinion that he was likely to continue ill a long time, and had better be removed to the parish work-house. Accordingly, the teacher kindly undertook to speak to the overseer, and get an order for his admission. Now it happened that the overseer of the parish was the very person to whom the little island belonged ; and when the teacher told him of the accident, he was very angry, and said that it served him right, for his dishonesty. "No doubt," said he, "these boys went with an intention of robbing me. I pay a great rent for those islands, on purpose that I may have the osier twigs and flags for making baskets ; and I assure you, sir, I lose pounds and pounds in a year by those travelling people, who scarcely ever buy any thing for their work, but steal it wherever they can lay hands upon it. I am always having one or another of them put into the cage or horsewhipped ; but

nothing seems to cure them. Depend upon it, sir, they are a bad lot altogether, and it is no matter what becomes of them." The teacher agreed that it was a very hard thing he should be thus injured ; "but," said he, "perhaps no one has ever taken the pains to teach these poor creatures what is right and what is wrong : besides, as they are now in distress, it is our duty to relieve them, and imitate the conduct of our Father which is in heaven, who causes his sun to shine upon the evil and the good, and sends rain upon the just and upon the unjust. I hope," said he, "you will overlook the past, and render them the assistance they need ; and who can tell but the distress which has come upon them in their evil practices, and your undeserved kindness in forgiving injury, and affording relief, may be the very means of inclining them to receive instruction, and prove in the end more effectual in securing you from farther injury than threats and punishments, which you acknowledge you have long tried in vain." The overseer was willing to listen to reason, and gave orders for the desired relief, at the same time observing to the teacher, "I know, Sir, you are very zealous for teaching the poor. I have never thought a great deal about it myself, but I have heard much said for it, and much against it. However, if you can find out any way to make travelling basket-

makers honest, I shall be inclined to thiuk better of learning than I have ever yet done." "Alas," replied the teacher, "we cannot cure them of vice, but we can use the means which God has appointed ; we can teach them what he has commanded, and what he has forbidden ; how sin will be punished, and how it may be pardoned ; and we can teach them to pray, and pray for them, that they may become partakers of that grace, which whatever their particular circumstances and situations may be, will "teach them to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present evil world"

On receiving the order, Robert (for that was the name of the poor afflicted boy) was removed to the work-house, and placed in a decent, comfortable bed, under the care of the mistress, who paid him good attention, and took care that he had and did every thing the doctor ordered, and that he was kept clean and comfortable. During the day or two that Robert had been at home, his mother and brother had done little more than attend to him, and the kind lady had sent them needful supplies of food ; but now their hands were free, she thought it would be a greater and more real charity to give them employment. When she called from time to time, she had seen the basket stand by, unfinished, which the mother had in hand when Robert

was brought home ; and as soon as he was gone, she asked what would be the price of it when finished.

"Tenpence, Ma'am, is the price," replied Mrs. Lane, "but if you have a mind for it, you shall have it for eightpence ; you have been very kind to us." "No," replied the lady, "I do not wish to have it for less than its value ; my intention, in purchasing it, is to do you good. And how long will it take you to finish it?" "Not long, ma'am, if we had a few more flags." "Oh," said George, "I know where to get plenty of flags, and I will soon finish it for the lady." "But, my boy," asked the lady, "are the flags you speak of, your own ?" "I can get a handful just to finish this," returned George ; "nobody will miss them." "Perhaps not," said the lady, "that is very uncertain ; but whether or not they are missed, it would be stealing them, and I cannot buy any thing which I know is made of stolen materials." "But such a few, ma'am, could not signify." "Oh yes it would : if there is harm in stealing a cart-load of rushes, it is wrong to take one. Suppose you had got a few flags in the house, just enough to make a basket, and that you could have no dinner till you had made this basket and sold it, should you not think it very wrong if any one came in and stole your rushes from you ? or only just a handful of them, so as to leave them

too few to make your basket?" George said he should; and the lady went on to tell him that the person to whom the flags, and rushes, and osiers, belonged, rented the ground, on purpose that he might have these things to make use of, for the support of his family. "And if you," said she, "take a handful now and then, and another does the same, do you not injure the owner? And if he does not get enough to pay his rent, and keep his family, is it not the fault of those who have robbed him?" George was silent, for he saw the truth of what the lady said; and though he did not understand or care much about the sin of stealing, he was ashamed that she should think him a thief. "Come," said she, "you shall go with me to Mr. Ashton, a neighbour of mine, who will perhaps put you in a way of getting the rushes honestly."

Now Mr. Ashton, the cooper and basket-maker, was the same person who had been applied to by the teacher, to admit Robert into the workhouse. When they went into the shop, the lady said, "Mr. Ashton, can you be so kind as to let me have a few rushes for this little boy, to finish a basket? I will pay you what they are worth." Mr. Ashton said the lady might have as many as she pleased: but, looking at the boy, he added, I think I know you before, young man. Pray where did you get the rushes

you began your basket with? Have you never been in the stocks for stealing them from my slips?" George trembled, and looked very much confused; but he was going to open his lips, and utter a falsehood, when the lady said, "I fear this little boy and his family may have been guilty of many wrong actions, in a great measure, from want of knowing better. We must endeavor to correct their mistakes, and hope they may yet become respectable and useful characters." Then Mr. Ashton gave the boy a good armful of rushes, as many as ever he could carry. "There," said he, "you are very welcome to those, but mind you don't rob me any more; and when you have done the basket, you may let me see it. If you work neatly, and can keep yourself honest, I have a great deal to do at this time of the year, I may perhaps employ you." George said, "I can't let you have this basket, for I promised it to madam; she was kind to us first; but you shall have the next, and welcome." The lady was pleased when she found that the boy's heart was touched with gratitude; it gave her a hope that something might be made of him; and she excused his ignorance in speaking as if he did his customers a favor in working for them. She did not take any notice of it then, for she would not confuse him by mentioning too many of his faults at once; but as they returned, in answer

to some question that she asked him, he used a wicked word, which shocked her very much. She told him of this, and said, "I am very sorry to find that you do not know some things which it is of great consequence you should know. Should you not like to be taught how you may be good and happy? how you may gain the favour of God, and be respected by those about you?" George said he should. Then the lady told him that there was a school, where he might go on Sundays, and be taught. And he said he would go. So she shewed him where the teacher lived who had been such a kind friend to them, and had saved his brother's life; and she bade him, on the Sunday morning, get himself as clean and decent as ever he could, and go to that house, and then the teacher would take him to the school. George was quite pleased. He went home and finished the basket, and, with the lady's leave, he shewed it to Mr. Ashton, who said it was neatly done, and gave him some work, which employed both him and his mother all the week. The lady gave him the tenpence for the basket, and she told him to remember three things;—that he must not rob any one of ever so small a matter,—that he must never use bad words,—and never either work or play on the Sabbath day; for the blessing of God never went with those who did such things.

As for Robert, he continued very ill ; his fever ran very high, he was in great pain, and quite helpless. While he was in this state, it was of no use for any one to visit him, for he was quite distracted, and did not know what he said or did. This is often the case with people on a sick bed ; and therefore it shews the folly of putting off repentance to so uncertain and unseasonable a time. After some time, however, he began to mend, and when he became calm and reasonable, the kind friends who had been so attentive to his bodily wants, were desirous to do something that might benefit his immortal soul. The teacher who visited him, did not at first converse much, because of his great weakness : but read a few verses of the hundred and third Psalm : and, kneeling down, gave hearty thanks to God, who had been pleased to hear the voice of prayer on his behalf ; and farther prayed that the soul of this youth might share in divine mercy, that his sins might be forgiven, his heart renewed, and the event prove a blessing to the whole family.

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